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Search



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🕒 December 11, 2013 💬 0 Comments 🏷️ Categories: Cynefin

Great is the power of steady misrepresentation



I promised yesterday to clarify some aspects of Cynefin. This was triggered by Roger's Linked In post and some of the response (reported yesterday) but it is not a specific response. Rather see it as a summary of multiple responses both articulated or otherwise over the last few years. To make something very clear up front; the fact that Cynefin has been taken up and used by many people is a source of considerable pleasure to me and I do my best not to get too precious. To the best of my knowledge I have only had to get difficult with one person over many years. More recently I created the domain models with a view to creating a structure by which other people could contribute to the growing body of work; more on that in future weeks.

So some points, in no particular order:

1. Cynefin is not intended as a crude categorisation model, although it has been used as such with some utility. It is as much about dynamic movements. So in the model shown here the prime dynamic is show in red. The idea is that ideas emerge in the complex domain and are then constrained to shift them into complicated. As you start to impose constraint you see if it creates repeatability, if not pull back. If it works then you shift from *exploration* to *exploitation*. Periodically you relax the constraints again to allow new possibilities to emerge. From time to time the dynamic may have ossified in which case a reset is need; the blue line known as a *shallow dive into chaos*. Only when change is no longer plausible is it shifted to *Obvious* (formerly Simple).
2. Chaos is a transitional domain. Now there is no overall agreement in the literature as to terms so everyone has to say what definition they are using. I am here using the constraint based definition, which means this is an unconstrained space, or a random one. I'll say here (for the first time) that I am half thinking of renaming this domain as well to make the point, but not yet if ever. If you collapse into it without then the strategy is to move out in a controlled way; you will move out as constraints happen naturally. Entered deliberately it can create the conditions for radical innovation, used as *contained chaos* it allows for distributed cognition or *Wisdom of Crowds*. Nothing resides in Chaos for any period without sustained effort.
3. Disorder is not the same thing as chaos. The latter is truly random, the second is the

state of not knowing which domain you are in. It may be *Complicated* for all you know. Disorder, other than as a transitional state is undesirable, all the other domains have value in context. The Obvious domain is next to Chaos because complacency (the extreme of Obvious) can all too easily produce catastrophic failure. Thus that boundary is represented by a cliff, or more technically (with a hat tip to Thom) as a catastrophic fold.

4. The three primary states are Order (including Obvious and Complicated), Complexity and Chaos. Order is split into two to handle a key difference in human knowledge between those states where the cause and effect relationship is obvious and those where it requires analysis or expertise. Cynefin thus contrasts how things are, with how we know them, with how we perceive them. The overall idea is that the more you allow these three to interact with each other the more likely it is that your actions will be authentic to the situation. The more you allow them to stand apart the more hazardous the eventual realignment. Think of the Catholic Church and Galileo if you want an example, or sub-prime lending for another.
5. Properly used Cynefin is defined by key narratives or metaphors from the organisations own history and its perception of the future. This is done using micro-narratives to define both the domains and the boundary conditions. It is (I think) a Cynefin unique as most models are defined by examples from the cases they have been drawn from. Cynefin is far more contextual. It allows a simple process of matching: *it looks like these so its complex and we probe we don't analyse*. This is how people argue anyway, by comparison to established narratives where people already agree on the answer. So we are following the natural flow of human sense-making.

So I hope that helps, we now devote the whole of the second day of the accreditation course to Cynefin and its domain models and expect SenseMaker® offerings for mapping shortly. Any more issues or questions ask!

The quote that forms the title is from Darwin by the way.

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